

Legal Aid honors the service of volunteers

Stephanie Geer was struggling to make ends meet when she received a notice that her wages would be garnished. Money was already tight - she was working fewer hours so she could care for her terminally ill husband. With news of the pending garnishment, she worried how they would manage. That's when a co-worker told her about Legal Aid.

Stephanie found relief through the non-profit law firm's Volunteer Legal Services Program. With the help of a volunteer attorney, she filed a chapter 7 bankruptcy, giving her a financial fresh start. Without the added financial stress, Stephanie could focus on being there for her husband.

Each year Legal Aid receives thousands of requests for help, far more than its staff of 34 attorneys can handle. And each year, over 200 private practice attorneys volunteer their time and expertise to help fill that gap.

During October, the firm recognizes and honors these volunteers for their service. Rachel Nader, managing attorney for the volunteer program pointed out that traditionally in-person events are held to celebrate. However, these events have been cancelled due to the pandemic.

"Even though we can't celebrate in person, we are deeply indebted to our volunteers," stated Nader. "Because of them, some of our most vulnerable community members get the help they need to overcome barriers and live safer, better, more qualitative lives."

Volunteers provide a wide-range of services that include fully representing clients in their legal matter to providing counsel during a clinic, or guiding clients through the process of representing themselves in simple matters.

Nader shared that she has been touched by the commitment and passion of volunteers despite the challenges brought on by the pandemic. The program's in-person legal clinics have been suspended as a result of Covid-19.

"Volunteers continue to serve clients, despite the inability to meet face to face at a clinic," Nader stated, adding that many are choosing to help eligible clients through phone or online appointments instead.

Since the beginning of 2020, volunteers have assisted on approximately 1200 cases. Steven McGarrity, executive director of Legal Aid, stressed the importance of the volunteer program, stating clients typically have nowhere else to turn.

"Simply put, our volunteers make it possible for more clients to resolve their legal issues," said McGarrity. "But for our clients, what that really means is that they are able to overcome what can seem like insurmountable problems and regain a sense of control, peace, and stability over their lives."

For Stephanie, it meant she could be at her best during the short time she had left with her husband. Geer shared her own thoughts about the volunteer program and the help she received.

"They helped two people that were struggling to just deal with what life had dealt us," said Geer.

“It gives you hope that there are people out there that help people in my situation.”

Attorneys interested in learning more about the Volunteer Legal Services Program can find information at www.communitylegalaid.org/VLSP. They can also contact the volunteer program directly at (877) 401-0088 or by email at vlspstaff@communitylegalaid.org.

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